



## Ramkinkar, the ‘Social Realist’ in Indian Art

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### Abstract

*Any artist is always influenced by his social environment and surroundings. RamkinkarBaij, who has given birth to modern thought in Indian sculpture even could not escape the social environment since then. Consciously or unconsciously, social thought has always driven him away. From the famine in Bengal at that time to the nature around him, Santhal people's life all emerged in his work with a new identity. First time, the labour class people became the subject of the sculpture by his hand. These works would not have been possible for any artist without deep sensitivity and social sympathy. Although he was a thoroughly modern sculptor in the Indian context in terms of subject matter, ideas, medium and technique, he was also a social realist. An attempt has been made to analyze this issue in this study.*

**Key words:** Sculpture, Social Realist, environment, traditionalist, modernism, realism, cubism.

### Introduction

No artist can avoid the influence of social life, environment that surrounds him. Perhaps there is diversity of thought and presentation, that is where the individuality of the artist is created. RamkinkarBaij's contribution to Indian sculpture can never be forgotten. Although there has been a rich tradition of sculpture in India since ancient times, the touch of modernity has been touched by the hands of Ramkinkar. He is a pioneer in many aspects of sculpture. For which many art critics have called him the ‘Father of modern Indian sculpture’.

It is not always true to judge Ramkinkar's works from the stand point of a traditionalist or a modernist. In many occasions his works crossed the limits of modernism. This is why; some critics try to categories him as a realist artist. When we call Ramkinkar a modern artist, we must also have to define the modernism he ushered in the world of Indian sculpture. Some, however, call Ramkinkar a modernist, a synthesist and an eclectic at the same time. But question obviously arises, where modernism aims to attain a change or break of tradition, and how a modernist become a synthesist also?

### Modernism and Ramkinkar;

Modernism is a complex idea. Did Ramkinkar follow the same path as for example, Picasso or Braque? Ramkinkar was always modern, always traditional. Lionel Trilling has said, ‘*Modernism is such a thing that it invites meaning after meaning, within meaning. Such that a time often comes when one meaning directly contradicts another meaning.*’

Nietzsche explained that art is an individual consciousness; it should not have any inroads in to the outer world. This free and imaginary world gradually alienates itself from human circumference and becomes ultimately a self-centric thing. This is where art becomes inhuman and unrealistic, just diction or a form made of some techniques. While modernism made the artists freer to them, it lifted them up in to a paradise of self-contradiction.

Modernism thus sows the seed of dehumanization. Breaking tradition in order to cultivate the new, took innumerable turns right from romanticism to naturalism and severing itself from humanism, it lowered itself down to self-centralism, to a refined, elitist language. This process gives rise to ‘radical



remaking of a form'. The renewal the old forms take the arts to an abysmal destructiveness. This may be termed as destructiveness or ruin as it finally reconciles itself to discovering newer forms. In this sense, modernism can be interpreted in the following lights: (1) It is the art of play, (2) It is delightfully fraud, (3) It is an aversion to the traditional, (4) It is a tendency toward self-pity or irony (5) It is private art and hoarding of artistic powers against populace and the claims of time and history (Mukhopadhyay : 1991).

If the interpretations of modernism be so, it may be said that Ramkinkar was a modernist too, though he sublimated modernism in his individualistic approach. He was basically an eclectic, a pluralist and he absorbed every 'ism' in order to use or apply them according to his own bend of mind, in an Indian canvas. This is why his art always spoke of humanism, of life.

Question again arises as how to understand Ramkinkar's art. Analysis must be pinpointed around these considerations: (1) Ramkinkar's inborn root and class character (2) the Society that existed during his live, (3) the trends of Indian art during his time, (4) the trends of European art during his time. (5) the multi-dimensionality that is inherent in his art-work, (6) his diction (7) his personal life.

Ramkinkar belonged to the lower strata of the society. His caste and class character undoubtedly had a significant effect on his art. He led a very simple and naive life apart from the middle-class mentality that existed at Santiniketan. He always kept himself detached from the fake and superficial life styles. He had his blood tie with the *Santhal* and the common people around. They were his real kith and kin. Even when he became famous as an artist, he never forgot his surroundings. He was a virtual being in so far as his culture and artistic endeavour was concerned but a horizontal or real being when we consider his life style. This thought led him to think about man, to draw human figures, to speak in behalf of human beings. He was always attracted towards nature. Ramkinkar enrolled himself in school, and he had to design backdrops for dramas in order to earn a livelihood at the sometime he prepared posters for the congress party. So, the education that taught him about life and about his art was not at all confined to the four walls of the classroom. He received a natural indulgence from both the natural and human surroundings and from Nandalal Bose and Rabindranath Tagore (Bhattacharjee : 2000).

#### **Social condition which stirred Ramkinkar:**

The world became a frying pan since 1920. Human beings all over the world encountered an insecurity which they had never faced before. In 1917, the Russian Revolution took place. The world power was divided in to two directions—while, on the one hand there was the presence of the Socialist Block, the Fascists Block on the other hand they tried to capture the world. In India two, the fight against the British imperialism was at its peak and hatred against the fascist force manifested itself in different forms. Both the national as well as the global politics become somewhat complicated. The post-war economic depression could not shake India as much as it shook Europe. In 1919 under the leadership of Pomand Roland the intellectual across the world raised their voice in the form of '*A declaration of Independence of thought*'. Two worlds renowned Indians put their signature in the declaration: They were Rabindranath Tagore and Ananda Coomarswami. In 1933, the European Anti-Fascist Workers' congress was held in Paris. In 1935 in the seventh congress of the third communist International, an open call was raised to build the Anti-Fascist and Anti-Imperialist people's front. In 1937 a committee was formed in Calcutta in the name of 'League against Fascism' whose president was Rabindranath himself. The 'All India people's Theatre Association' was formed in 1943. There was a flow in progressive movement of India thought the country. This worldwide movement, this renovation of art and culture from 1935 to 1948 must have stir Ramkinkar too. That may be a reason he created the paintings/sculpture on the 1943's Famine? This Famine in Bengal also gave birth to realist artists like



Joynul Abedin, Chittaprasad and Somnath Hore. The difference lies in the fact that whereas Chittaprasad and Somnath Hore did some political paintings during that period, Ramkinkar view point was different. Both the artists were close to the Communist party of India, and perhaps expressed political thoughts. But Ramkinkar, on the other hand, was always close to the proletariat, he did not have to declass himself (koushik : 1991).

Social thought and social content always inspired Ramkinkar. During the same periods two artist's groups come into existence, one in Bombay and the other in Calcutta, viz, 'Progressive Artist Group' (1943) and 'Calcutta Group' (1943) respectively. Both the groups rejected the Indian tradition and counted in borrowing from the European art, everything such as their language, technique, diction and style. Some of the artists belonging to these groups, no doubt, produced paintings in themes like communal riot and famine. But do these occasional touches make an artist a progressive one? Progressive outlook is not an impulsive urge; it is a belief which cannot be broken into pieces. A progressive artist is not progressive occasionally, he is forever progressive. Rabindranath Tagore himself was an example of this, his position as a creative being is distinctly different in the contemporary milieu from his co and fellow beings (Mitter : 2007).

Ramkinkar said himself; '*Rabindranath is the first Indian artist to break the convention. He refused convention not for the sakes of discovering a new form or mannerism of his own, but for a deep functional necessity*'. Rabindranath Tagore's time and again implored his nephews to see life not from the balcony of Jorhasanko. He made complaints that the picture of Abanindranath Tagore and Gaganendranath Tagore did not touch the soul. Absence of vigour and vitality was very much there in their art. Abanindranath himself admitted having said to Rabindranath Tagore, "*I can paint whatever I want to paint. That is why I have no challenge before me which can inspire me to paint.*" But he rectified himself around 1928-30 through his series of paintings call the '*Arabian Nights*'. He painted new models of new themes then. His classical style then come to include even daily wage earners and vendor and had to give way to folk styles which was ready to express a dream land. Nandalal Bose's style too took on a new turn just after 1921. His preoccupation with legends and myths, literature based wash style modified itself to incorporate the common villages, rickshaw puller, *Santhal* people and temperas on the simple natural beauty (Debi Prasad : 2007).

During the last phase of Rabindranath Tagore's art work (1928-41) and Abanindranath Tagore's career (1929-42) or of Nandalal Bose's second phase (1921-67), we find in change of theme— as if they had a comeback from their dream land to the real world. Also there are ample evidences of a dictional and stylistic change. To be more precise, it was between 1920-1942 that realism came to win over the arena of Indian art, and this realism was not a photocopy of Euro-realism. Realism here does not stand for mere mimesis or reflection or representation of the reality but '*Realism is characterized among other things by art's liberation from mythological modes of thought, an extraordinary broadening of the sphere of phenomena from real life by special system of artistic technique and use of image etc.*'

This interpretation of realism is true for Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose in the contest of their artistic performances, but for Rabindranath Tagore this is true for his literary and philosophical pursuit during the whole decade of 1930's. But art can be critically evaluated in the context of its space and times. Pseudo or non-progressive art is always more fertile than its so called progressive counterpart. But humanism has always been a constant factor in his history of the evaluation of art. We can come to the generalization that 'all art is a form of protest—a reaction against the social order'. Ramkinkar's art too represents this trend.



Realism had its inception in Europe in the second half of the 19th Century in art and literature. Realism expanded its roof in America art since 1910. But there is a vast difference between realism and social realism. Realism proposes to break a pro-mythic trend and to welcome new techniques and thought in art and literature which are free from the conventional feudal enclosures. Realism can emerge only under a particular social condition. This is why it is seen that when the wave of social realism come to the erstwhile Soviet Union and Mexico (1915-30) realism mostly reigned the art world of England, Germany, America and India (Tomory : 2011).

### **Ramkinar as Social Realist:**

After 1920, a change comes over the art scenario in India too Ramkinkar himself was an activist of this change and has earned a name as a profounder of social realism in the history of modern Indian Art. Another trend was in vogue in Bengal during 1925-40; that of naturalism. Some artists of the Bengal school, like the students of Abanindranath Tagore, viz., Ramendranath Chakraborty, ManindraBhusan Gupta, Haren Das. L. M. Sen, were the supporters of this land. Many critics, however, Commits a serious mistake in connecting Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose with this trend. The revolutionary change that took place during the last phase of their artistic journey almost surgically severed their tie with mythic trend. But Naturalism had its influence at Santiniketan also. Ramkinkar himself admitted: "*Naturalistic art in fact found favour is Santiniketan*". Ramkinkar had a particular liking for realistic painting. The question of commitment becomes associated with it. Perhaps he was influence by his own time and space. Since 1925, whatever Ramkinkar painted, bears the signature of the Bengal School. Gradually, however, he found his own signature and developed his own style. That is why, Ramkinkar's art is not confined to any particular wave or school. Art critics right from Jaya Appaswami to scholars till date have divided the artistic career of Ramkinkar in to these phases: (1) The abstract, (2) Semi-abstract, (3) Cubist, (4) Realist and Socio-realist stages (Mukhopadhyay : 1991).

Ramkinkar was certainly influenced by different school of European art, for example Cubism. Ramkinkar created many a painting and sculpture that is essentially Cubist. He broke his plain much in the same fashion as the Cubist do. His use of the vertical line, the horizontal line and the diagonal line has rendered his expression much subtler and poignant. Lines illuminate his canvas like a flicker of lighting. Ramkinkar used geometric patterns but his geometry was always emotive and humanistic. His recurring themes were the common people who come from the lower strata of life. Even his mythological works show a blending or a fashion with the present. In *Birth of Krishna* (1950), the figure holding a sword in one hand is a sheer definition of a new zoner, because even if it is a mythological character its physical approach was contemporary. No interpretation is needed to explain whom this *Kongsharepresents* in this piece (Narzary : 2011).

Even though he often broke his flat plain, but his style of portraiture does not resemble the mode of the cubists like Picasso of Braque? This is evident from the fact that he used body structures of different males and females in order to bring out the essentially Indian nature and style. He kept himself away from the typical romantic world of the Bengal School and embraced a technique that represented the harsh and coarse reality. Examples are lies *Santhal Family* and *Call of the Mill*. Among his contemporary artist, only Chittaprashad, Joynal Abedin and Somnath Hore shared this tendency. But in the world of sculpture, Ramkinkar had no counterpart. This is why Ramkinkar's place in the history of art will be categorized as a realist artist and sculptor (Mukhopadhyay : 1991).

Art Historian Shivaji Panikkar said in an interview during his visit in Assam University in 2012, '*May be Ramkinkar was not interested to make personal property or money, wealth, in this sense he can be marked as communist but not in official term. He was come out as bohemian artist, who did not care anything, which is called as Bengali 'khepaboul'*'. But Ramkinkar never compromised with his creative



work. Actually, he was quite different from so called 'bhadrolok' (gentleman). He himself was an institution.'

### Conclusion:

It was Ramkinkar who created a new trend in Indian sculpture. He is the shaper of modern Indian sculpture. He studied and assimilated all the 'isms' of the art world and applied them in his own way. He has created what is uniquely his own. Ramkinkar is truly a modern sculptor. But always connected with tradition. He never forgot his roots. His work combines tradition and modernity. Sometimes it has crossed the threshold of modernity. Sometimes he worked against the stream but he was not always completely subject to any influence. However, knowingly or unknowingly, social thought has always driven him away. So, in his work the poor Santhal life has been revealed with a new aspect. Nature, environment, social life, livelihood are the subjects of his work. He showed that sculpture could be created without glorifying anyone or royal patronage. The labour class, holding his hand, is represented for the first time as a subject in Indian sculpture. This work is not possible for any artist without deep social sympathy. So, he is not only a modern sculptor but also a 'social realist' in the true sense.

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